

Area 17**East Balmain Conservation Area****Landform**

This area is noted for its dramatic rugged sandstone headland facing east into the harbour and towards the city, with sheer sandstone cliffs to a deep and steep waterfront.



Figure 17.1 East Balmain Conservation Area Map.

History

This area comprises the earliest land to be subdivided and developed in Balmain. Surgeon Balmain was granted 550 acres in 1800. He transferred it to fellow surgeon John Gilchrist in 1801. In 1836 Surveyor Armstrong subdivided the most eastern part of Gilchrist's land, the area closest by ferry to Sydney Town, into twenty-two 2-4-acre lots. They were put up for public auction in 1836 by Sydney merchant and land agent, Frank Parbury on behalf of the absentee landowner. Subdivision of the remainder of Gilchrist's land was suspended from 1841-1852 through disputes over his estate. For its first ten years, therefore, East Balmain was an isolated maritime suburb, accessed generally only by water.

The 1836 subdivision laid out three streets – Darling, along the top of the sandstone ridge, Johnson and Nicholson, setting the framework for Balmain today. Each lot had access to one of these streets and to the waterfront. They were advertised as waterside, dock and shipping properties in 'the Deptford of Sydney'.

Purchasers were merchants, boatbuilders, master mariners who needed the deep water frontages for their shipping activities; middle class professionals and civil servants who purchased the land for investment, for later resubdivision or to build their own villa; speculative builders such as Robert Blake who saw the peninsula as a marine retreat for gentlemen and proceeded to build villas in spacious grounds for that market. The early elegant villas, eg Hampton Villa, built of stone hewn from the allotment itself, or from land nearby,

stood on the higher ground, and enjoyed fresh breezes and views of Sydney Town. Close to the waterfront and the shipbuilding activities were the houses of ship captains and merchants, often of timber or stone cut from their own land.

Subdivision of these allotments, either immediately, or after the 1840s slump, required new streets for access. Unaffected by the regulations of Sydney Town, they were made only as wide as was absolutely necessary, leaving as much land as possible for sale. In the 1860s small streets were cut through the sandstone to give access to an increasing number of industries along the waterfront. Associated industry followed – timber yards that served the wooden shipbuilding yards, tanneries that used the harbour for their effluent. Subdivision of the villa estates occurred through the 1840s and 1850s, often to pay off creditors. It led to the acceleration of small suburban allotments and suburban growth to serve the growing demand for both housing and industry, the latter having been pushed from the city by rising land values. Shops, pubs and a school grew at or near the intersection of the major streets, serving a growing population. There were pockets of infill development from 1910–1930s and by the 1940s East Balmain was fully built-up. After the 1960s, as the waterfront industries closed down through changing technology, waterfront sites were taken over by the Maritime Services Board for port activities or storage. From the 1970s these under-used parcels of land were turned into public waterfront parks.

Sources

Solling, M and Reynolds, P 1997, 'Leichhardt: on the margins of the city', *Leichhardt Historical Journal*, Vol. 22, Allen and Unwin.

Significant Characteristics

- Dramatic sandstone topography.
- Views down streets, between buildings and across the headland to harbour, harbour bridge and city. Main streets all end with dramatic city/harbour/industry views.
- Main streets all terminate at water or at cliff top.
- Many very narrow, steep minor streets and rights of way follow boundaries of the first twenty-two allotments.
- Sandstone steps cut into the bedrock transfer pedestrians between levels.
- Some dense stands of trees.
- Intermix of buildings – sandstone villas, sandstone, weatherboard and brick cottages and terraces, school, maritime industrial buildings, corner stores (former), shops and pub.
- Rare early buildings, mainly in timber and stone.
- Neighbourhood shops and pubs grouped around the Darling Street/Johnston and Nicholson Streets intersection.
- Low fences – some early iron palisade fences remain.

- Sandstone kerbs and gutters.

Statement of Significance or Why the Area is Important

- One of a number of conservation areas which collectively illustrate the nature of Sydney's early suburbs and Leichhardt's suburban growth particularly between 1871 and 1891, with pockets of infill up to the end of the 1930s (ie prior to World War II). The earliest developments here predate Leichhardt's main suburban growth with marine villas and cottages from the 1840s to modest-scale housing from 1870s through to the 1930s, and industry. It is significant for its surviving development from these periods.
- Demonstrates through the siting of recent public parks, the location of former waterfront industries. Through these parks and its remaining waterfront activities East Balmain can interpret Sydney's port history from the early 1840s, and the role of Balmain's deep water frontages in that story.
- Demonstrates through the line of its narrow streets the earliest subdivision sections of the large 550-acre Balmain grant.
- Demonstrates through its steps and cuttings the way in which early roads and pedestrian routes were forged out of the sandstone bedrock.
- Demonstrates through its mixture of sandstone villas and timber and brick cottages the major themes that formed this suburb – marine villa development and investment, port and waterfront activities, and the continuing layering of these developments.
- Through its remaining timber buildings it continues to demonstrate the nature of that major construction material in the fabric of early Sydney suburbs, and the proximity of the timber yards around the Balmain waterfront.
- It is of aesthetic significance for its dramatic sandstone landscape, closely related to the harbour, and clearly revealed below the modest scale of its nineteenth century and early twentieth century buildings. It stands in contrast with the nearby city where twentieth-century technology has forged an equally dramatic but very different man-made landscape.

Management of Heritage Values

Generally

This is a conservation area. Little change can be expected other than modest additions and discrete alterations. Buildings which do not contribute to the heritage significance of the area may be replaced with sympathetically designed infill.

Retain

- All residential or commercial structures pre-1939 belonging to the period of the growth of East Balmain.

- All weatherboard buildings – now rare but typical of early development.
- All sandstone structures and cuttings – cottages and villas, schools, wharves/slipways, curbs and gutters, walls, bases to fences, steps.
- Unpainted face brick walls.
- All original plaster finishes to external walls. Reconstruct where necessary.
- All original architectural detail, and encourage replacement of lost elements, but only where evidence is available.
- All sandstone outcrops.
- Views between buildings from public places, especially views to the harbour.
- Trees, especially large figs which form such an important role in the landscape of the area, and views to the area from the harbour.

Avoid

- Demolition of any pre-1939 building unless the building has been so compromised that it can no longer evidence its history.
- Alteration to the form (shape) of these buildings, especially wall height or alterations to the roof over the main part of the house. Second-storey additions.
- Removal of plaster to external walls, where part of the original wall finish.
- Painting or plastering of face brick walls.
- Additional architectural detail for which there is no evidence, especially the addition of verandahs, and post-supported verandahs.
- Loss of any trees.
- Inappropriate high front brick/stone fences or walls, or new iron palisades on high brick bases.
- Interruption to the remaining sandstone kerbs and gutter.
- Widening of the narrow roads.
- Development that detrimentally affects views from the harbour, Harbour Bridge and the city to East Balmain, or disrupts its skyline when viewed from those places.

Notes

Because this area is very visible from the city and from the harbour and harbour bridge, special care is needed in dealing with changes which might alter public views from these places – scale, roof form and material colours are particularly important.

Care is needed for applications for change to any building in these areas. There are a number of very early buildings here, overlaid with later works, and

restoration to reveal the original building could be possible in many cases. Many of the early stone houses were built by stonemason Cavill, and evidence of his work should be sought.